



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20460

MAR 31 2006

OFFICE OF THE  
ADMINISTRATOR

**MEMORANDUM**

**SUBJECT:** Action Plan: Competency-Based Approach to Collaboration and Partnering in the Hiring, Training and Recognition of EPA Employees

**TO:** James L. Connaughton  
Chairman, Council on Environmental Quality

Linda M. Springer  
Director, Office of Personnel Management

**FROM:** Stephen L. Johnson  
Administrator

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "SLJ", is placed over the printed name and title of the sender.

It is with great pleasure that I submit the attached Action Plan which lays out a path to incorporate collaboration and partnering competencies and skills into the fabric of EPA's human capital plan. I fully support Luis Luna and the other Chief Human Capital Officers' initiative to develop these plans, as outlined in your joint memo of November 28, 2005. This Action Plan is a key part of EPA's effort and commitment to implement the President's Executive Order 13352 on Cooperative Conservation.

Since the Agency's inception, collaboration and partnering have been among the important tools used by EPA to carry out our mission to protect public health and the environment. EPA staff and management understand the importance of working with the full range of diverse interests to identify and resolve the local, regional, national, and global issues that we face together. I have personally witnessed the growing importance and use of collaboration and partnering. As Administrator, I want EPA to collaborate with our partners to understand the practical implications of our actions. I want EPA to be a part of a constructive problem-solving strategy that will reach our collective environmental and economic objectives. By promoting a culture of collaboration over conflict, EPA is also working with our community leaders and non-governmental organizations to usher in the next era of environmental protection.

I also want to emphasize that this Action Plan is a dynamic document that we intend to update frequently as we expand the discussion with EPA staff, management and others about different ways to define and implement these competencies. We will work with our existing

Innovation Action Council) to review the plan and develop specific actions and milestones to implement it. As a first step, we will be discussing the action plan at EPA's Human Resources Council (HRC) meeting on April 5-6, 2006.

Please do not hesitate to call me if you have any questions.

Enclosure

## **Action Plan: Competency-Based Approach to Collaboration and Partnering in the Hiring, Training and Recognition of EPA Employees**

### **INTRODUCTION**

A recurring theme throughout the White House Conference on Cooperative Conservation was the importance of a competency-based approach to developing the necessary collaboration and partnering skills in the Federal workforce. Based on this idea, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) agreed, through the Chief Human Capital Officer, to support an approach to ensure the appropriate inclusion of collaboration and partnerships in achieving environmental and public health objectives, where consistent with EPA's mission. This Action Plan is a dynamic document that will be updated frequently to reflect discussions with EPA staff, management and others about different ways to define and implement these competencies. We will work with our existing internal organizations (Human Resources Council, National Partnership Council, Innovation Action Council) to review the plan and develop specific actions and milestones to implement it.

Executive Order 13352 defines cooperative conservation as "actions that relate to use, enhancement, and enjoyment of natural resources, protection of the environment, or both, and that involve collaborative activity among Federal, State, local, and tribal governments, private for-profit and nonprofit institutions, other nongovernmental entities and individuals." All of the offices within the EPA are engaged in actions that relate to use, enhancement, and enjoyment of natural resources and protection of public health and the environment. While EPA has many collaboration and partnership success stories to its credit, we continue to develop knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors within the organization to promote attainment of the Agency's mission and foster cooperative conservation.

The term "cooperative conservation" is new at EPA, but the concepts that are its foundation, partnership and collaboration, have been part of the way the Agency has worked for many years. EPA cannot protect public health and the environment alone or strictly through regulation and enforcement. For more than 35 years EPA has been operating with and through partners in state, local, regional and tribal agencies, industry and businesses, and nongovernmental organizations representing diverse interests. Though we often use collaborative processes to develop and advance the science at EPA, we do not compromise its integrity.

William Ruckelshaus, EPA's first Administrator, recognized that only by working in partnership with our co-regulators, stakeholders and the public could we achieve our mission. More recently, Administrator Mike Leavitt, emphasized increased capacity for collaborative problem-solving. Administrator Steve Johnson has articulated his three principles to accelerate the pace of environmental protection; one of which is "innovation and collaboration." In parallel, under the theme of environmental stewardship, EPA is working to unify a host of activities EPA undertakes to encourage and enable all parts of society – companies, communities, individuals, as well as government – to take responsibility for their environmental impacts. Partnerships are a primary means by which EPA encourages environmental



stewardship behavior that leads to sustainable outcomes, and a key way, along with collaborative problem solving, that EPA practices and promotes cooperative conservation.

Since the beginning, EPA has been using environmental conflict prevention and resolution techniques to encourage collaboration. The plans and actions below also build on EPA's strong history with public participation in our decision-making processes. Our 2003 Public Involvement Policy, built on its 1981 predecessor, is a model for government agencies around the world, and all of EPA's offices, in headquarters and the field alike, are involved in collaboration on some level. Thus, to fulfill our obligation to serve the public, we must all work collaboratively with each other, partners and stakeholders.

## **DESCRIBING AND DEFINING COLLABORATION AND PARTNERING COMPETENCIES**

The Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) executive core qualifications (ECQs) for the Senior Executive Service (SES) are based on extensive research of the attributes of successful executives in both the private and public sectors. The 27 leadership competencies incorporated in these core qualifications reflect some of the best thinking of many senior executives and associations, as well as government human resources professionals.

The agencies named in the Executive Order collaboratively reviewed the 27 OPM leadership competencies and identified the following as being fundamental to the success of cooperative conservation at various organizational levels:

These existing competencies become a logical starting point for discussion about the different ways that collaboration and partnering might be framed and ultimately applied given the nature of EPA's mission.

**Partnering** - Develops networks and builds alliances, engages in cross-functional activities; collaborates across boundaries, and finds common ground with a widening range of stakeholders. Utilizes contacts to build and strengthen internal support bases.

**Influencing/Negotiating** - Persuades others; builds consensus through give and take; gains cooperation from others to obtain information and accomplish goals; facilitates "win-win" situations.

**Interpersonal Skills** - Considers and responds appropriately to the needs, feelings, and capabilities of different people in different situations; is tactful, compassionate and sensitive, and treats others with respect.

**Creativity and Innovation** - Develops new insights into situations and applies innovative solutions to make organizational improvements; creates a work environment that encourages creative thinking and innovation; designs and implements new or cutting-edge programs/ processes.

**External Awareness** - Identifies and keeps up to date on key national and international policies and economic, political, and social trends that affect the organization. Understands near-term and long-range plans and determines how best to be positioned to achieve a competitive business advantage in a global economy.

**Entrepreneurship** - Identifies opportunities to develop and market new products and services within or outside of the organization. Is willing to take risks; initiates actions that involve a deliberate risk to achieve a recognized benefit or advantage.

**Problem Solving** - Identifies and analyzes problems; distinguishes between relevant and irrelevant information to make logical decisions; provides solutions to individual and organizational problems.

**Conflict Management** - Identifies and takes steps to prevent potential situations that could result in unpleasant confrontations. Manages and resolves conflicts and disagreements in a positive and constructive manner to minimize negative impact.

## **EXAMPLES OF EPA'S CURRENT EFFORTS**

Some of the ways in which EPA is using collaboration and partnering to support our mission and advance the theme of cooperative conservation are listed below. These examples are merely illustrative.

-- The Great Lakes Regional Collaboration is an unprecedented collaborative partnership which has brought together resources and ideas from partners throughout the Great Lakes basin – regional, state, local, tribal, federal and non-governmental – to develop a strategy to ensure that the lakes remain an international treasure, forever open to trade and tourism. We are harnessing the collective ideas and energies of more than 1500 representatives from all sectors of the Great Lakes community.

--EPA's Border 2012 Program has partnered with six states in Mexico, four states in the U.S. and with the 26 border Tribes to develop solutions to the environmental and public health problems of the area.

-- EPA's Brownfields Program is a collaborative model of environmental protection that forges strong public-private partnerships, and promotes innovative and creative solutions to some of the nation's most pressing environmental challenges. By encouraging cleanup and redevelopment of hundreds of thousands of America's abandoned and contaminated waste sites, EPA's Brownfields Program has leveraged more than \$7.2 billion in private investment, helped leverage more than 33,500 jobs, and resulted in environmental and site inventory and associated community outreach assessment of more than 7,400 properties.

--The Brownfields Program is also collaborating with state, local, and private partners on ways to solve environmental problems that affect specific sectors, such as the Portfields Initiative and the Mine-Scarred Lands Initiative.



--EPA, HUD, Department of Commerce (the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)), National Institute of Environmental Health Science (NIEHS), Department of Justice (DOJ), Department of the Interior (DOI), Department of Transportation (DOT) and others have provided millions of dollars in federal grant funds for Brownfields assessment and cleanup, economic development, transit programs, stormwater infrastructure, an urban design study, crime prevention and police technology.

--The West Coast Collaborative (WCC) is a public-private partnership working to reduce diesel emissions on the West Coast. Since June 2005, the WCC has leveraged over \$2.5 million in EPA funds with over \$15 million in matching funds by Collaborative partners to implement 28 projects in the most affected communities.

--EPA Region 9 and 14 other signatories from the dairy industry, academia, and other state and federal agencies developed a voluntary industry-led effort—the California Dairy Quality Assurance Partnership (DQAP)—to increase compliance with the state and federal environmental requirements.

--The Schuylkill Action Network is a collaboration that is working to improve watershed health in Southeastern Pennsylvania through projects that reduce pollution in the Schuylkill River. In the short time from its inception in 2004, the total number of organizations represented increased from 69 to 108 in 2005. The EPA team that developed and implemented this initiative has just been awarded the Agency's Gold Medal Award.

--EPA has formed an Agency-wide Collaboration Practitioners Network to share information and help senior officials determine how best to improve the effectiveness of EPA's collaboration efforts.

-- As part of its Collaborative Problem Solving initiatives, EPA developed a White Paper identifying seven keys to effective collaboration, conducted dialogue sessions throughout the organization, and developed and is implementing a plan for more effective collaboration. The plan outlines initial actions in four strategic areas, including building expert knowledge, skills, and capacity to collaborate, and fostering collaborative leadership at all levels.

--EPA's Innovation Action Council developed a report entitled "Everyday Choices: Opportunities for Environmental Stewardship" and is currently developing a plan (April 2006) to implement the report's recommendations.

--EPA's Office of the Inspector General (OIG) participates on the *President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency* (PCIE) which includes staff from all of the residually-appointed Inspectors General. Two communities we participate on actively include the PCIE HR Committee and the PCIE OIG Human Resources Director Network.

--The OIG Human Capital Management Strategy identified increases collaborative efforts with OIG product support offices and Agency human resource officials. This action will help to integrate and assess the utilization of human capital resources effectively.

--All OIG performance plans include one critical element whereby employees are rated on their contributions to team efforts and successes. A standard under our critical communications element also encourages "an extraordinary degree of initiative to collaborate with supervisor and stakeholders."

--EPA's Regional Geographic Initiative (RGI) is a critical tool for assisting non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with regional conservation projects, for catalyzing partnerships between NGOs and other stakeholders, for integrating federal, state, and local conservation priorities, and for leveraging private and public funding for acquisition and management.

--EPA is improving the consistency and quality of our interactions with the public, expanding options for solving environmental problems, and increasing the sustainability of solutions by implementing our 2003 Public Involvement Policy and by providing tools for staff and managers to assist them in planning, carrying out, and evaluating public engagement activities.

[<http://www.epa.gov/publicinvolvement>]. (The Collaboration Practitioners Network built on a previous Public Involvement Improvement Council).

--EPA developed a "*Collaboration and FACA* [Federal Advisory Committee Act] *at EPA*" fact sheet to clarify when and how to use FACA to support collaborative processes; we have also developed a fact sheet on internal Agency work group collaborations.

--EPA developed a fact sheet on its tools and services available to support collaborative problem solving; we have also developed short fact sheets showcasing some key collaborative case studies.

--EPA established an Internet collaborative web site (<http://www.epa.gov/innovation/collaboration/overview.htm>). The website links to the Public Involvement Resources and Training database, which has been expanded to include collaboration as well as public involvement information.

--Several of our regions have field offices which improve our ability to communicate, partner and collaborate with state, local, and tribal governments and with public and private partners.

--EPA works with many partners such as the Environmental Council of the States (ECOS) to develop new and better means of prevention, enforcement, clean-up, and measurement.

## **EXAMPLES OF EPA'S CURRENT HUMAN RESOURCES (HR) EFFORTS TOWARD IMPLEMENTING COLLABORATIVE COMPETENCIES**

EPA is supporting cooperative conservation through the human resources (HR) strategies listed below.

--EPA's Human Capital (HC) Plan, Workforce Development Plan, and Collaboration Action Plan all include collaboration and partnership skills development through training (Senior



Executives, mid-level managers, new supervisors, new employees), and building these competencies into existing training courses.

--The Agency signed the *EPA Labor-Management Partnership Strategic Plan and Operational Guidance* on April 13, 1003. The Plan has two long-term objectives to advance the goal of increased collaboration: to identify problems and craft solutions that better serve the Agency's customers and mission; and to foster mutual respect and trust, which strengthens our commitment to work together to build constructive, cooperative relationships at all locations across the country.

--EPA has just implemented a new performance management system (Performance Appraisal and Recognition System, or PARS) which encourages inclusion of teamwork and collaboration critical elements and performance standards. The Agency has also re-emphasized the use of Individual Development Plans (IDPs) to reflect the desired skills. As training needs are identified through the IDP process, employees are encouraged to take training in collaboration and partnering skills that is available through USALearning, Superfund CIU, and other external vendors.

--Hiring interview questions are being revised to reflect the desired skills. Questions on teamwork and collaboration are now used when interviewing EPA Interns and Presidential Management Fellows (PMFs).

--EPA's Mid-Level Development (MLDP) Training program consists of five headquarters-developed courses (e.g., *"Getting Work Done with Others"*) that focus on development of the essential core competencies identified by OPM and the EPA Workforce Assessment Project. The competencies of Leading People and Change; Results Focus; Business Acumen; and Building Coalitions and Communication provide the focus for the training courses in the MLDP. Region 9 has in-house resources to lead several of these classes. The Region has also taken the lead to continually update course content which was developed in 2001.

--EPA's Leadership Institute has several learning activities that allow employees to discover skills that will assist them in building cooperative relationships with their colleagues and external partners. *"Stepping Up to Supervision"* includes a 360-degree assessment that measures the collaborative skills of employees who engage in this activity. *"Excellence in Supervision"* has many components that explain the critical nature of collaboration in accomplishing the mission of the Agency.

--Region 8 is planning to offer a "Power, Politics, and Partnership" course that provides insight and strategies on how to create cross-functional collaboration across organizational silos as well as environmental partners and how to address issues systemically rather than personally.

--Region 8 has a "Coaching our Partners" program which has trained internal coaches to provide coaching to the Agency's managers and staff. Internally on workplace issues and also has a contract for external coaches. In addition, these coaches provide coaching services (at no cost) to our external partners. Examples of partners who are receiving coaching are watershed coordinators, Tribal Directors, and leaders of a variety of external state and local government



programs. Results of this program include an increase in collaborative efforts between internal partnerships as well as external ones.

--For nearly a decade, the Agency has hosted a conference and training devoted to enhancing the collaborative skills of EPA and its federal, state, local, and tribal partners who plan and implement EPA's public participation programs. This annual event, initiated by the Superfund Community Involvement Program in 1998, provides a diverse and unique educational program in which participants learn from one another.

--The Superfund program's Community Involvement University (CIU) provides opportunities for headquarters and regional staff from EPA programs to build the requisite skills for successful community involvement. The CIU offers 16 different courses that cover community involvement, facilitation, risk communication and cross-cultural collaboration. The Superfund program is conducting a training needs assessment to determine the need for new and more advanced training and for addressing obstacles that prevent EPA staff from attending training.

--In 2004 and 2005, Region 9 conducted a Staff Rotation program designed for staff in non-supervisory positions, providing them with a unique opportunity to collaborate with new internal and external partners during 6-12 month temporary assignments outside of their current program office but within Region 9.

--In 2006, Region 9 has 13 staff on place-based assignments and 10 employees participating in Intergovernmental Personnel Act (IPA) assignments.

--Strong partnerships are being forged with government agencies, industry and others through EPA's more than 90 voluntary programs.

## **ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

Implementation of the collaboration and partnering competencies ~~Executive Order~~ involves a joint effort between field/program managers, human resource professionals, and senior leadership. Key roles of individuals and groups include:

--The Chief Human Capital Officer (CHCO) at EPA is the Assistant Administrator, Office of Administration and Resources Management, who will have the major responsibility for ensuring that the collaborative competencies are implemented and setting a climate that fosters and supports these competencies.

-- EPA's Human Resources Council (HRC) is made up of senior representatives from across the Agency's Regions and Programs. The Council will have a key role in designing the action plan and guiding its evolution and implementation. The Human Resources Council is meeting April 4-5, 2006 and will discuss this effort.

--The Director, Office of Human Resources (OHR), will be responsible for overseeing the development and implementation of necessary policies, procedures, processes, and training for

effectuating these competencies in EPA. This includes championing the establishment of a National Collaboration Award.

--The National Partnership Council (NPC), in conjunction with the Office of Human Resources (OHR), implements the *EPA Labor-Management Partnership Strategic Plan and Operational Guidance* (signed April 13, 2003).

--EPA's Office of Policy, Economics and Innovation (OPEI) is collaborating with the Office of Human Resources to ensure that a good representation of EPA's collaboration efforts is included in reports to OPM and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and supporting the Collaboration Practitioners Network that is responsible for guiding development of innovative tools and resource materials on partnering and collaboration.

--The National Training Manager, regional training officers, and other HR specialists and program/management analysts are responsible for evaluating EPA's training programs/processes to ensure that these competencies are incorporated in each learning activity; and for identifying additional training resources to develop and enhance these competencies in all of EPA's training and learning activities.

## **LONG-TERM STRATEGY FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF COLLABORATION AND PARTNERING COMPETENCIES (5-YEAR HORIZON)**

EPA is committed to a competency-based HR system and comprehensive workforce planning. EPA will identify positions where collaboration and partnering competencies are important to implementing EPA's mission. EPA will then validate competencies for these positions, identify current and projected skill gaps, and develop comprehensive plans for closing these gaps.

### **Hiring**

Hiring is one way to close skill gaps within an organization. Once covered positions are identified, validated questions based on the competencies will be developed for use in our automated hiring system and job interviews.

As part of our recruiting effort, we will ensure that our recruiters at academic and other institutional job fairs/career days emphasize the collaboration and partnering competencies when communicating with faculty members, college administrators, guidance counselors, and students. We will use our existing and future relationships with academic institutions to recommend the inclusion of collaboration and partnering competencies in curricula and practical training.

We will encourage expansion of the dissemination and marketing of EPA's vacancy announcements and promotional and developmental opportunities to reach seasoned administrative and technical professionals from other agencies, academia, private industry, state and local governments, and Tribes who bring a wealth of environmental knowledge through practical experience that the Agency may not have possessed.



## **Training**

--EPA conducted a two-day workshop entitled "*Community Culture and the Environment: Understanding a Sense of Place*," on March 29-30, 2006. Participants learned about and used participatory planning tools to enhance their understanding of community culture and its impact on watershed protection efforts. The course, which is regularly offered and conducted by experienced EPA facilitators, was coordinated by OHR and OPEI.

--EPA engages in multi-media presentations through on-line learning. We currently have several training programs that focus on the identified collaboration and partnering competencies. These courses can be found on the USALearning web site. On-going marketing efforts will be made to increase the number of employees who access the on-line learning components.

## **Recognition**

--EPA has been working through its internal National Awards process to develop a national-level award for partnership and collaboration. A proposal for the award was submitted to the National Awards Board in 2005.

--EPA's Gold and Silver Medal Awards process includes a criterion on collaboration.

--EPA will use its new performance appraisal and recognition system (PARS) to incorporate collaboration and partnering competencies into employee performance agreements, as appropriate, in consultation with employee organizations.

## **WORKING ACTION PLAN**

This plan identifies the activities that EPA intends to use to more formally describe the nature of these competencies, and make them a central part of our human capital strategy and how we do our future work. By its very nature, this action plan will be adaptive, to reflect the discussions with staff, management, employee organizations, external experts and our Federal partners.

## **Discussing the Plan within EPA**

--Discuss this Plan with EPA's Human Resources Council (HRC) during their meeting on April 4-5, 2006

--Discuss this Plan with EPA's Innovation Action Council (IAC) during their meeting on April 26, 2006

--Discuss this Plan with the National Partnership Council (NPC) at their meeting on June 13, 2006.

## **Enhancing and Sharing Information**

--Expand the EPA Internet and intranet clearinghouse on collaborative problem-solving by adding new documents and tools as they are developed by:

- Increasing the publicity about the clearinghouse's documents/tools to EPA's internal and external partners and customers
- Sharing resources with the other four agencies covered by Executive Order 13352.

--EPA has started to collaborate with other Federal agencies to include their employees in our on-site training programs, which include: "*Excellence in Supervision*," "*Stepping Up to Supervision*," "*Situational Leadership*," and other programs where the critical competencies are addressed.

--Region 8 has offered its Mid-Level Development courses ("Excellence in Supervision" and "Crucial Conversations") and consulting services to our state partners in an effort to collaborate and improve partnerships. In addition, we invite our state partners to attend training with us—when appropriate—to build our partnerships.

--DOI and EPA (Conflict Prevention and Resolution Center (CPRC) in the Office of General Counsel (OGC)) will conduct a one-day workshop on May 3, 2006, as a catalyst for discussing how regulation development by DOI, EPA and other federal entities can be enhanced to provide for greater engagement (e.g., negotiated rulemaking).

--EPA will encourage and support employees to seek and participate in developmental opportunities and temporary assignments with other federal, state, and local agencies, tribes, and nonprofit organizational partners with whom we collaborate.

--EPA will enhance its marketing efforts about available training resources and opportunities (e.g., details, conferences, IPAs, etc.).

### **Reaching Agreement on Collaboration and Partnering Competencies**

--Building on EPA's past experience, we will work with supervisors, managers, and staff to better articulate and define what constitutes the essential competencies (i.e., collaboration and partnering) and their corresponding descriptions, as they apply to the nature of EPA's work. This will occur in several ways:

- discussions with the Human Resources Council
- discussions with external experts
- discussions with staff, managers, and union representatives

--EPA will then work with the Executive Order 13352 agencies to seek OPM validation for modifications to the SES (Cooperative Conservation) competencies and any new competencies.

### **Planning to integrate with OMB's "Proud to Be" Requirements**

--This plan satisfies EPA's Strategy 1.2 "Proud to Be" (P2B) commitment to develop an implementation plan for using a competency-based approach to developing collaboration and



partnering skills to meet the objectives of Executive Order 13352. Our regional offices' P2B local action plans all include:

- Supporting national efforts (when applicable and feasible) in implementing talent and management strategies when closing competency gaps;
- Demonstrating support for this initiative through training and recruitment practices; and
- Reviewing existing inventories of skills and competencies in the current workforce and conducting additional inventories as needed.

### **Validating Application of Competencies**

--Develop internal mechanisms and measurements to enable EPA to validate whether a competency gap has been closed.

--Work with partner agencies to develop and share tools, processes, mechanisms, and best practices for validating the effectiveness of competency integration.

--EPA's OHR will continue to measure the effectiveness of learning activities and any increase in skill or change in employee behavior.

### **Coordinating with Unions**

EPA will consult with its unions, as appropriate, regarding implementation of its collaboration and partnering competencies for the cooperative conservation initiative.

### **Gaining Support for Implementation (Short- and Long-term Needs)**

--Obtain support from the Human Resources Council (HRC) to follow through on the strategies outlined in our plan.

--Financial and staff resources to accomplish activities outlined in our plan.

The Agency is emphasizing an increased level of collaboration competency for managers and staff so that they know when and how to engage productively with others to achieve better environmental outcomes. EPA encourages comments from managers and staff, particularly through the forums referred to above which will help to improve the Plan in the coming months.